ORIGINAL PAPER

Incorporating Social Networking Sites into Traditional Pedagogy: a Case of Facebook

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Abstract The use of online social networking sites for educational purposes or expanding curricular opportunities has recently sparked debates in scholarly forums. This potential, however, has yet to attract sufficient attention in second language classes, and particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. The current study explores the affordances of Facebook to help both improve EFL students' vocabulary knowledge and develop their vocabulary strategy learning in a blended learning course. To this end, a Facebook page was created to engage an intact class of first-year undergraduates ($N = 25$) majoring in English in a package of vocabulary learning strategies. The analysis of the data from Facebook content (i.e., the posts and comments shared throughout a semester) and a student focus group discussion revealed that students benefited from participating in different activities to improve their knowledge of English vocabulary and develop their awareness of various vocabulary learning strategies. The results, however, raised several concerns about the integration of Facebook into traditional pedagogy as a formal platform for language teaching and learning.

Keywords Facebook · Blended learning · Lexicology · EFL

As the most popular social networking site, Facebook has helped users to friend others, communicate and share information with a global audience, pass their free time, manage their social life, and enhance their networking skills (Madge et al. 2009; Palfrey and Gasser 2008; Selwyn 2009). Facebook also has the potential to offer teachers and the new generation of students enormous opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication (Jee 2011), as well as the collaboration and exchange of ideas and information (Stanley 2013). Not only can Facebook help students bond with their peers (Godwin-Jones 2010; McCarthy 2010), but it also can reshape or redefine their relationships with their teachers. Integrating Facebook into language learning programs also has the potential to assist language learners in improving their writing skills (Al-Shehri 2011; Yancey 2009), develop socio-pragmatic competence (Chen 2013), engage in peer feedback and peer assessment activities (McCarthy 2010), share or even design interactive multimedia resources (Kern et al. 2008), and take advantage of subscribing to a visible forum to have access to learning resources in different modalities. More importantly, EFL students can use Facebook to enhance their exposure to the target language and facilitate their participation in a collaborative learning environment outside the classroom context. This helps them reach out to English native speakers and more proficient users in order to discuss their learning problems or the content of a new lesson (Horwitz 2008).

Despite these capabilities and the optimism among researchers and educators, little empirical research has investigated the use of Facebook in L2 (second language) classes (Aydin 2012; Blattner and Lomicka 2012), and this scarcity of research is more evident when it comes to the teaching and learning of L2 vocabulary, which could be considered to be the first and most important component of learning another language. Previous studies in this area (e.g., Kabilan et al. 2010; Lai and Gu 2011) have focused on the students' use of Facebook to enhance their opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning. To fill in this gap, the current study aims to investigate the affordances of Facebook to help both build undergraduates' vocabulary knowledge and develop their vocabulary learning strategies. More specifically, in this study

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we a) investigated the extent to which students' engagement with learning activities on Facebook can improve their vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary strategy learning, and b) examined the rewards and challenges of integrating Facebook into traditional pedagogy.

The Study

Participants and Context

An intact class of 25 first-year undergraduate students (13 female and 12 male) majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT) at a major international university in Cyprus participated in this study. Participants had an average age of 21.48, and they were all Turkish-speaking students who came from different Turkic countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and North Cyprus; hence homogeneous in terms of their educational, cultural, and linguistic background. All participants registered for *Lexicology* (ELT 110) as a compulsory course during the second semester. The purpose of this course, according to the course description on the department website, was to develop the students' knowledge of vocabulary including their knowledge of word formation, idioms and expressions, colloquial and slang terms, collocations, proverbs, and euphemisms.

Because students met for a 3-h session every week, the class time was not sufficient to cover all aspects of their vocabulary development. Thus, a Facebook page was designed to extend classroom activities online and to familiarize students with different areas of vocabulary building strategies highlighted by the course description (i.e., prefixes, suffixes, word roots, word associations, idioms, quotations, collocations, and euphemisms). About every week or 2 weeks, one strategy was posted on Facebook along with clear instructions and several examples, requiring students to contribute by adding more examples or comments. The course teacher/administrator (first author) set up a closed group called *Lexicology* (see Fig. 1), where only group members could write posts or read each other's posts, and joining the page required the approval of the teacher/administrator. All participants, except for three, had already held a Facebook account at the beginning of the study. Those three students who did not want to go public online, however, signed up under an alias with their first name written in parentheses for their classmates to recognize them.

Instruments and Procedures

The content of *Lexicology Page* was examined to investigate the extent to which students' engagement with learning activities on Facebook contributed to their L2 vocabulary

Fig. 1   A screen shot of Lexicology Page
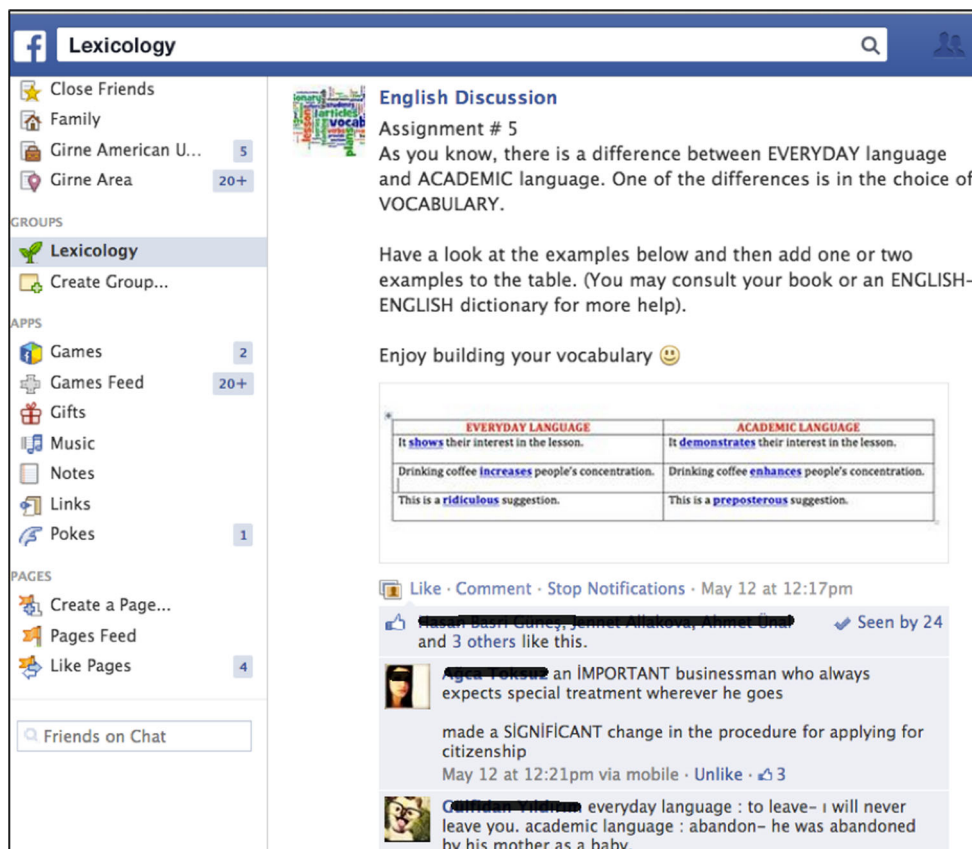
development and strategy learning. To do so, first all postings shared by the group members were counted to determine the volume and focus of their work. This content was further consulted to identify the type of activities students benefited from or struggled with while working online to improve their L2 vocabulary. Wherever necessary, students' exchanges and comments were reported verbatim in support of the main findings.

As another source of data, 12 students volunteered to participate in a focus group discussion, which aimed to elicit their opinions on the benefits and challenges of working on Facebook and to obtain in-depth insights into their engagement with different vocabulary learning activities and strategies online. This discussion, which was conducted in English at the end of the semester and was moderated by the teacher/administrator, lasted for approximately 50 min and the whole process, with students' permission, was digitally recorded. Students' responses and comments were then transcribed and categorized under four different columns representing the core topics of the discussion. Afterwards, each section was read several times to identify and reach a consensus on the most common responses or themes. Finally, the most inclusive themes along with representative comments were selected, edited to ensure clarity, and reported as part of the findings of the study. To protect students' identities, pseudonyms were used throughout the process of reporting the results.

Results

To investigate the extent to which the students' engagement with learning activities on Facebook improved their knowledge of vocabulary, the content of *Lexicology Page* was analyzed. As seen in Table 1, an overall of 67 posts were launched on the page: 21 initiated by the teacher and 46 by students. Of these, 58 cases generated comments from students and the remaining were announcements, supplementary links, and resources shared without expecting any specific response or

comment from the group members. These posts generated 823 comments, 14.18 per each post. Compared with the students' uploaded posts, however, those initiated by the teacher elicited more comments, suggesting that the level of student-to-teacher cooperation, if not merely interaction, was higher than student-to-student interaction.

While students had opportunities to collaborate in order to negotiate the form and meaning of new vocabulary items openly or via messaging (both synchronous and asynchronous), their participation on the page was mostly restricted to completing their assignments only. Even in several cases, when the teacher or a student offered direct feedback on the group members' problems or errors or initiated indirect feedback in the form of a question to encourage more participation, students remained reluctant to interact, and their feedback was limited to pushing the *like* button or sharing positive emoticons.

As another major finding, it was observed that students' participation and engagement in learning activities was to a considerable extent similar in both environments. For example, students who were active online, willing to communicate with their classmates and write comments, were also the most active and motivated students in the classroom. Similarly, two students who were regularly absent in the classroom were absent from online discussions as well. Likewise, those students who were required to join the page quit it when the semester was over. Also, similar to the campus context, where students leave the classroom when the course is over, except for one student who used the page to say goodbye to his classmates before transferring to another university in Turkey, nobody has shared any post on the page for the last two semesters.

Further analysis of the page content, however, revealed that students benefited from engaging with various learning materials to develop their knowledge of L2 vocabulary and vocabulary learning strategies. Among them, the online environment offered students more time at their disposal to carefully read their classmates' archive of comments before framing their own responses or thoughts. This flexibility in time, with the time span between the first and the last comments exceeding more than a week for many posts, increased the diversity and plurality of students' responses. Given that no deadline was set for the posting of students' comments, this time span in reading others' comments, sometimes much longer than uploading the next assignment, could be, at the same time, considered as one of the challenges of using Facebook for more intensive language learning programs.

It was also observed that students attempted to use only English when responding to the material shared on the page. As an example, in response to a picture with a caption in Turkish (regarding the difference between visiting a library on the left and seeing a palm reader on the right in Fig. 2) used as a prompt to encourage the students' use of their new

Table 1 A breakdown of posts and comments on *Lexicology Page*

Page content	Frequency
Posts	67 (46 initiated by students and 21 by the teacher)
Posts that generated comments	58 (9 were announcements and links)
Comments	823 (377 written in response to the teacher's posts and 446 in response to the classmates' posts)
Total (posts and comments)	890

Fig. 2 Sharing supplementary material on *Lexicology Page*
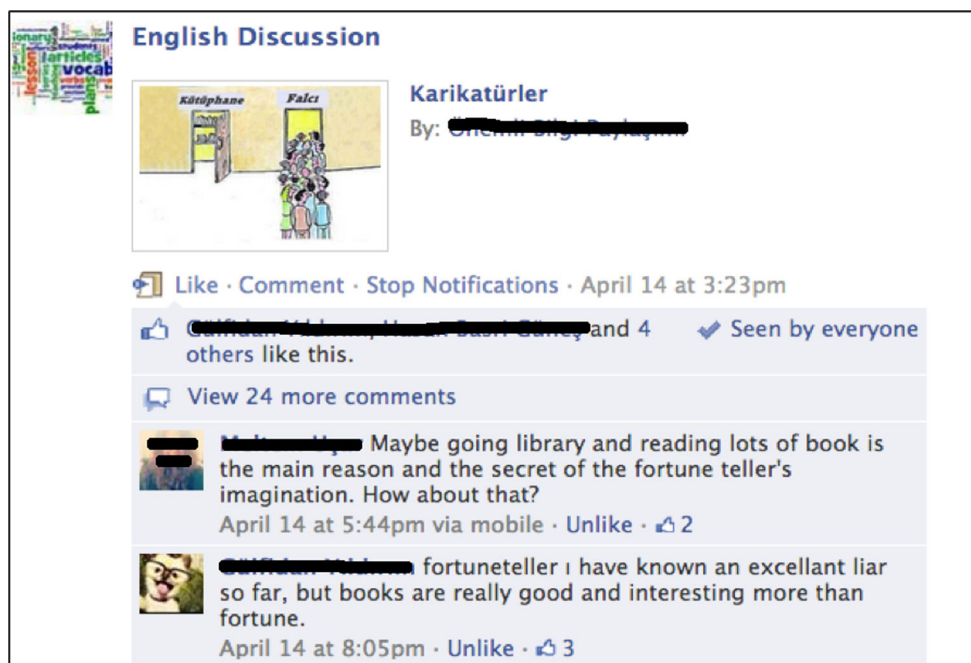
vocabulary in a more culturally contextualized and authentic way, all 24 comments, except for one, were made in English.

In addition, while the number of exchanges between students did not exceed seven times (following seven launched posts), students endeavored to use the new vocabulary and expressions in real-life situations. Having learned about idioms, for example, as one of the covered vocabulary development strategies, one student asked his friend, "When will you get hitched?" Another student used, "Hit the sack" when she was apologizing to her friends to go to bed around midnight. Likewise, using banter to exchange playful comments in a friendly manner, two students displayed their knowledge of idioms and common structural patterns in a row:

Student A: do you want more example Evrim?
Student B: burn the midnight oil like this. its up to you. the more you give examples the more your friends learn;)

However, students were more likely to exchange comments on entertaining and funny than on educational posts. Put simply, they were interested in the topics irrelevant to the serious learning tasks, but rather in the ones they could avoid serious exchanges. While they exchanged comments in English, which was a benefit of using this online forum, they tended to switch codes (i.e., insert Turkish words into their comments) and were also less concerned about the spelling and structure of their sentences or about disabling their

keyboard layout from Turkish to English. The following is an excerpt of a lengthy conversation between three students on the post shared in Fig. 2.

Student A: İ wanna be falcı not teacher…
Teacher: Why not?
Student B: people prefer to hear someting not to learn.
Student A: ☺
Student C: hahaha it's really true:) hamit abi if you believe in you will be a good falcı, why not? it can be suitable for you ☺ ☺ Thus we often visit you then:)
Student A: Okey … do i have to go school to be falcı.. mmmmmm tuba .mmmmm i look your piccccc mmm you will have a boyfriend soon. This was for free if u want know more 50 liras.
Student B: ahhahahahah grin emoticon hamit abiiii
Students C: reallyyyyy, i will have a boyfriend :):) okayy hamit abii of course i can give you much money if you tell me about my future:):)
Student A: Emine i can see you your boyfriend he has two eyes mmmm
Student C: is he handsome boy?
Student A: Yes very handsome… where is my 50 liras
Student C: But This is not enough. :):) you should tell me more. then i will give don't worry:):)
Student A: And if you give me 100 i can tell his shou size aswel.

Although the attempt was made not to copy the exact classroom activities online, it was noticed that follow-up classroom

guidance was necessary to clarify some of the online assignments and posts. Furthermore, while all group members viewed all posts, as shown via *seen by* icon on the right corner of the comment field, this did not guarantee the fact that they read all the comments made in response to each post.

Regarding the rewards and challenges of integrating Facebook into this face-to-face lexicology course, the analysis of data from focus group discussion revealed several emerging themes. Most important of all, students reported an easy access to various learning resources in order to complete their assignments or write comments on the shared posts:

I enjoyed working on the page because I found it a new way of learning vocabulary … The teacher's posts were easy, and I could use my dictionary and *google* the strategies to learn about them. By the time I wanted to comment, there had been sometimes more than 20 posts on the page … I hope we can work on similar pages next semester. (Sara)

As another common theme, students commended the resourcefulness and accessibility of the online environment in general. Not surprisingly, most of the students equated using Facebook with the Internet, referring to it as a source of information and knowledge they could have access to wherever and whenever they wished.

I always surf the net to learn about new things, but sometimes I get confused. On this page, there were some clues and topics to help me search for what I wanted… I believe we should know where to go and how to find things because the Internet is like a jungle. (Emre)

Additionally, students joining Facebook for the first time expressed their satisfaction with the whole experience because they realized the power of technology in connecting with others, improving their English, and developing their knowledge of vocabulary in particular.

This was my first time I have ever used Facebook. I learned to use Facebook for sharing things and for improving my English … The page helped me learn about proverbs, euphemisms, beautiful sayings, sentences, quotes, etc. (Mehmut)

However, students voiced several concerns about exploiting Facebook for language learning purposes. Among them, students expressed their dissatisfaction with the intrusive nature of Facebook. That is, students felt an obligation to frequently check the page for the new posts and assignments, and complained about being disturbed by the constant notifications.

Sometimes working on Facebook made me uncomfortable. I felt that I had to check the page every minute, and this was the boring part … I did not like receiving constant notifications on the new posts or comments. (Damla)

Insufficient peer feedback and interaction was another frequent comment regarding the challenges of working on Facebook, with some students complaining that their classmates were not interested in intervening when they had problems, though they were aware of their presence online.

I was surprised when I saw students were online, but they did not give any feedback on my comments … I think this was the most annoying fact. (Simay)

Students also believed that the formal aspect of teaching should not have taken precedence over the informal aspect of learning on Facebook. In other words, students expressed a preference for seeing the page both as an educational as well as an entertaining environment, which could be open to everybody.

I think Facebook users are looking for fun. It would be better to entertain students with attractive songs, videos, pictures, etc. … I believe students should help, too, and the page should be open to all. (Mert)

Discussion and Conclusions

For this study, the affordances of Facebook were explored to mediate first-year undergraduates' L2 vocabulary development in a blended learning course. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Allan 2007; So and Brush 2008; Spiliotopoulos 2011), it was found that the classroom environment and the online space played different but complementary roles to shape a blending learning experience to help students cope with one of the most excruciating tasks of learning another language. Integrating Facebook into the course extended learning activities beyond the physical walls of the brick-and-mortar classroom where students, as opposed to the impromptu face-to-face interaction of the classroom context, had ample time in hand to reflect on learning tasks, review newly learned material, and access a great deal of information on vocabulary learning tips and strategies. However, the level of students' participation and their motivation to engage in the learning activities were to some extent similar in both environments, suggesting that a well-designed and

implemented syllabus would work for language learners regardless of the medium of the course delivery, although more planned and expected learning agenda are incompatible with the nature of self-managed social networking sites.

The results also indicated that, as many scholars (e.g., Sheldon 2008; Waycott et al. 2010) observed, students displayed a considerable level of disclosure online, without being concerned about their privacy. This disclosure, however, only rarely did go beyond the students' participation to complete their assignments and comment to become eligible to claim the participation credit. Although several factors such as their low L2 proficiency and heavy coursework could have affected students' further contribution to their learning on the page, the findings suggest that the success or failure of blending Facebook with traditional pedagogy may depend on the context of use and compatibility between institutional goals and student goals (Garrison and Vaughan 2008; Moskal et al. 2013). Likewise, the impact of socio-cultural factors on students' decision and the extent to which they wanted to disclose or relax their social defenses should not be ruled out. Students in this study interacted less with each other and looked up to the authority by looking forward to commenting more on their teacher's rather than their classmates' posts. These are particularly common practices in the contexts where students experienced face-to-face instruction only; hence unaccustomed to blended learning courses (MacDonald 2008).

Contrary to the traditional classroom-based learning where teachers may be the sole input providers or problem solvers, students in this study demonstrated a sense of agency to access various sources of information to respond to the shared posts and threads, which in some cases led to the generation of more than 70 examples of a vocabulary learning strategy. However, students were less keen on taking part in scaffolding and feedback reciprocation activities to resolve the emerging learning problems. Although social networking sites have been recognized for their role in facilitating peer-to-peer communication (Godwin-Jones 2010) and scaffolded learning (Hartshorne and Ajjan 2009; McLoughlin and Lee 2010), the level of student-to-student interaction in this study remained very low. In spite of this reluctance to interact and communicate online, students nevertheless established and maintained a sense of community, which is regarded as one of the prime reasons for incorporating Web 2.0 technologies into language learning classes (Lamy and Zourou 2013; McCarthy 2010; Stanley 2013). This sense of community, which was strengthened by using the 'like' feature, smileys, and other positive emoticons, was seen to boost students' motivation to participate more actively in pair and group activities and discussions in the classroom.

Similar to the participants in Blattner and Lomicka's (2012) study, students in this study were highly inclined to share and chat more when personal and entertaining material were posted, a preference which was aligned with the informal aspect of

Facebook and its potential to promote incidental (Sockett 2013) rather than serious learning occurring on other virtual spaces such as blogs and wikis (Lai and Gu 2011). It then stands to reason why several students felt uncomfortable and bothered by receiving constant notifications when the informal aspect of Facebook was overshadowed by formal learning agenda. This finding suggests that an online context hosting a class is no longer limited to certain periods but instead becomes an expectation that a single class demands all time and attention. Clearly if this is continued to be used as a learning mechanism, clear boundaries and limitations (e.g., students are not expected to respond immediately, how much they are expected to check posts, ability to turn off notifications, etc.) will need to be developed. These restrictions further imply that although teachers can use online social networking sites for a variety of purposes, such as updating and exchanging factual and logistical information with students about assignments, deadlines, and exams (Selwyn 2009), they are still far from fully exploiting them as platforms for formal education.

Overall, while acknowledging that language practice is "creative and evolves with time in response to changes in communicative needs and opportunities" (Savignon 2007, p. 212), and students do not learn everything in the classroom (Benson 2006), we should remember that students may use social networking sites such as Facebook to avoid studying and vent off their boredom. Thus, the use of Facebook for educational purposes can be questionable, if not impossible, because universities generally prefer to subscribe to a learning management system like Moodle, Blackboard, or Compass that allows students and teachers to generate interaction through discussion boards outside classroom, without triggering any of the privacy concerns or the so-called 'creepy treehouse' effect (Young 2008) of using Facebook in the classroom.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In this study, students from the same class formed a closed group on Facebook. Yet, this may not fulfill the goal of joining social networking sites in an era "when physical geographical boundaries separating communities of language users become dissolved in the world of cyberspace and online communication networks" (Ushioda 2011, p. 199). Future incorporation of Facebook into language learning classes could therefore be designed in a way that everybody, or at least account holders with the same goals or interests, can form a group. As another limitation, students rarely attempted, except for few cases, to give feedback on their peers' comments. This might reflect students' strong social solidarity and their attempt to save face, i.e., not to humiliate or to be humiliated by their friends. Although this could be explained by the rationale behind social networking sites that have been developed to improve

people's public 'faceworking' (Selwyn 2009) rather than address each other's mistakes and errors, students' engagement in this forum appears to be influenced by the dynamics of their group work activities. Thus, future studies might seek to obtain more insights into students' experiences and attitudes toward group work and collaborative activities before integrating an online component into their classes.

Students also used Facebook as an enabling space to share the information they searched and retrieved from the Internet. In other words, the results are informative as they are concerned with how students searched, for instance, for an idiom online and transferred it to the page on Facebook. Navigating the Internet as an information-seeking tool to complete assignments might be considered to be one positive aspect of using Facebook, although these two have different histories and purposes. Therefore, affordances of Facebook (versus those of any other online discussion forum or versus having students consult the Internet for homework) could be another path for future studies. Even, many benefits and challenges in discussing both the survey and the focus group data were similar to that of any other online discussion forum (e.g., being able to read others' comments first; annoyance at checking for updates or receiving many notifications of updates) are also characteristics of the Internet (e.g., easy access to different learning websites and online dictionaries). While this remains open to further debates and research, it is important then to acknowledge that all online discussion forums, or the Internet, in general, share such characteristics.

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